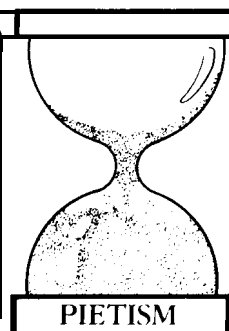


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



Vol. VIII, No. 6

©Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., 1994

July, 1994

THE BLESSEDNESS OF INCONSISTENCY

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

Generally speaking, inconsistency is a character trait we should all strive to avoid. Paul grieved over his own sinful struggles within, struggles that led him to a lamentable spiritual and moral inconsistency: "For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do,... For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice" (Rom. 7:15, 19). He even rebuked Peter for his waffling over full acceptance of the Gentiles (Gal. 2:11-15) - Peter's anti-Gentilism, if you will.

But inconsistency is not always an evil. In fact, Christ points to it as an occasional virtue: "But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go, work today in my vineyard.' He answered and said, 'I will not,' but afterward he regretted it and went. Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, 'I go, sir,' but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father? They said to Him, 'The first.' Jesus said to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you'" (Matt. 21:28-31).

I am thankful dispensationalists are inconsistent in some areas. And I pray that they will strive for an even greater inconsistency in this area. Let me explain.

Operational Postmillennial Dispensationalism

In 1981, *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction* published an article of mine entitled "The Greatness of the Great Commission." In that article (which later gave rise to the book by the same name) I documented the retreatism inherent in dispensationalism. One jewel of a quote I discovered in the dark mine of classic dispensationalism was a 1973 comment by Jerry Falwell: "The Bible says no man that wars entangles himself with the affairs of this life. You have got to decide where the battle is. The battle is out on the front lines . . . A good soldier does not get involved in all that monkey business while the work is left undone. We have a soul winning job to do. Why should we leave the battle?" This is a logical consequence of escapist rapturism; it is consistent "classic dispensationalism."²

But before the article was actually published, Falwell had "entangled himself in the affairs of this life" by founding the Moral Majority. So editor Gary North inserted a parenthetical comment to bring my article up-to-date: "Rev. Falwell's recent creation of the Moral Majority program, his participation in the Christians' March on Washington in the summer of 1980, and his enthusiastic support of the Roundtable, a Christian political activist organization in Washington, indicate a major shift in the application of his premillennial theology . . . It represents a kind of theological schizophrenia, but a welcome affliction that is far preferable to the more consistent retreatism of 1870-1979."³

Later, North coined the expression "operational postmillennialism" to summarize this schizophrenia.

This is a classic example of welcome inconsistency: a little brass polishing on an allegedly sinking ship, if you will. This is the kind of inconsistency I long to see in classic dispensational circles. In a way, dispensationalists are mimicking Paul in this inconsistent cultural endeavor. I can hear them now: "For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do [i.e., create retreatist bumper stickers], that I do not practice; but what I hate [i.e., challenging fallen culture with the righteousness of God's Law], that I do. If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good" (Rom. 7:15-16).

Self-consistent Dispensational Retreatism

Classic dispensationalism's retreatism is rooted in the very heart of its eschatology. Adherents see the "fulfillment" of doom-oriented prophecy every day. Consider an advertisement I received in January, 1992, for the dispensationalist *Omega-Letter* published by Peter Lalonde. It was entitled "5 New Fulfillments of Bible Prophecy." Contained in it were pictures of Saddam Hussein (remember him?) and Mikhail Gorbachev (remember him?). On the back of this brochure were the following endorsements:

Hal Lindsey: "The *Omega-Letter* is a leader in providing fascinating, complete, and totally reliable information on the incredible prophetic fulfillments of this generation."

Jack Van Impe: "World events seem to indicate that the end-times are indeed approaching. I'm sure the *Omega-Letter* will challenge you to life as if Christ were returning tomorrow." A little later in an article entitled, "There Is Hope!" published in Van Impe's own newsletter, Van Impe states: "This present world is rapidly coming to an end. It is on an irreversible collision course with destiny. Indeed, the hour IS later than it has ever been before!"

Or consider John Walvoord's interview in U.S.A. Today (January 19, 1991). Walvoord: "Bible prophecy is being fulfilled every day." ...Q: So the prophetic clock is ticking? A: Yes. ...Q: So should people fear the end is near? A: The world isn't going to end. That's quite clear. It's going to go on for more than 1,000 years, but it is going to be the end of Western civilization as we know it."

On the back dust jacket of Tim LaHaye's *No Fear of the Storm* (1992) we read: "Are you ready for Christ's Return? Do you believe that at any instant you could find yourself hurtling through the skies to meet your Lord face to face? ... Are you living your life as if each moment could be your last on earth? Christians today have more evidence that Christ could come in our lifetime than any generation that has come before."

How could any theological system holding to such im-

minency doctrine-such expectation of impending catastrophic despair - challenge fallen human culture? It cannot. If consistently promoted. Peters put it quite boldly in his dispensational missions text:

Christ is the wisest of all philosophers. He is the wisdom of God, yet He founded no philosophical school, Christ is the greatest of all scholars and educators, yet He instituted no educational system. Christ is the greatest benefactor and philanthropist, yet He founded no social welfare societies, institutions or philanthropic foundations. Christ was "Christian presence" with deepest concerns for freedom, social uplift, equality, moral reformation and economic justice. Yet Christ founded no organizations or institutions to initiate, propagate or implement the ideals which He incarnated . . . Christ did not become involved in processions against Roman overlords, slavery, social and economic injustices, or marches for civil rights, higher wages, or better education. He was no "riot" leader or social revolutionary. He authorized no one to be such.'

What is more, this escapist orientation has been present in dispensationalism from its beginning. In fact, it is the very essence of classic dispensationalism. W. Blair Neatby, in his 1901 work *A History of the Plymouth Brethren*, put it well: "Brethrenism is the child of the study of unfulfilled prophecy and of the expectation of the immediate return of the Saviour. If any one had told the first Brethren that three quarters of a century might elapse and the Church still be on earth, the answer would probably have been a smile, partly of pity, partly of disapproval, wholly of incredulity. Yet so it has proved."⁵

Now to My Point!

But, praise God, dispensationalists are not *a/ways* consistent with their theology. (Although I am convinced that the contemporary decline of Christian influence is largely related to the retreatism of vast numbers of "consistent" dispensationalists.) Allow me to review a recent article in Dallas Theological Seminary's scholarly journal *Bibliotheca Sacra*. Even the title of the article is inherently contradictory to dispensationalism.

That brass-polishing, imminency-denying article is "Evangelical Education for the 21st Century," by Kenneth O. Gangel, Vice-president for Academic Affairs, Senior Professor of Christian Education at Dallas Theological Seminary.' Of course, the article is tainted with dispensational despair. But the point of the article is that we need to beef up evangelical education for the *next century*! By the time 2000 comes around, we will be fifty-two years past the founding of the modern State of Israel.

Let me cite a few comments from the article that are interesting. Several of these illustrate the inconsistency of dispensationalists; others are interesting notes for postmillennialists.

Gangel comments that "today Christians number about one-third of all humanity and constitute more than half the population in two-thirds of the world's 223 nations." I remember being jumped on by a radio listener (who wrote to me later) when I made a similar statement to Tommy Ice in a radio discussion on eschatology.

The point of his article is clearly stated: "In this setting, this article explores six dimensions of evangelical education and

how they might look over the next 10 years. It updates material published approximately 10 years ago in *Christian Education: Its History and Philosophy*" (472). He keeps updating his work and projecting it into the future! He cites statistics projecting population growth and aging up to the year 2030 (472).

In dispensational fashion, he laments the hope for Christian cultural renewal: "The evangelical community may have finally abandoned its hopeless longing for an evangelical renaissance" (472).

But then he turns right around and notes that "deplorable statistics are no reason for abandoning Sunday school, but rather for energizing it and for reforming and revitalizing it to fit the church of the 21st century and its strategic opportunities" (474). Why? Shouldn't we be living like people that don't expect to be around much longer, ala Lindsey? Or did he mean "to fit the Jews for the millennium of the 21st century"? Perhaps he inadvertently substituted the "Church" for "Israel."

Not realizing his theology is largely to blame, Gangel observes: "Today's society is not an atheistic one in which a beleaguered church strengthens its muscles through resistance, but rather a society for which God and His people have become irrelevant" (476).

He points out that "America has one Protestant church for every 550 adults," noting that "membership in those churches will stay about the same, representing 69 percent of adults in the 1990s, compared with 68 percent of adults in the 1980s" (473). Can there be any hope in all of these statistics? Apparently so!

All in all, the struggles we now face "need to be seen in balance with society's blessings. Thirty-five hundred new churches open every week world-wide. In China alone, Christianity is growing by an average of 28,000 people every day. Meanwhile the church in Africa increases by 20,000 per day on the average. That continent was 3 percent Christian in 1900 and over 40 percent Christian in 1990" (479). In short, "God is doing amazing things around the globe, and the potential of reaching the remaining unreached people groups by the year 2000 seems almost within grasp" (479).

How should we then live? "Evangelical educators can take hope in the sheer dimension of need faced by contemporary society. Understanding the needs of the church, the community, the nation, and the world provides an opportunity to serve proactively rather than reactively, to challenge and confront a society of selfishness and despair with the life-changing, **hope-giving truth of God's eternal Word**" (479).

Amen, Dr. Gangel. Preach on! Buy what about the Rapture? And ultimate despair? Thank you for inconsistency.

1. Cited in: Elmer Towns, *Capturing a Town for Christ* (Old Tappan, N. J.: Revell, 1973), 139-140.

2. See: Gary North, *Rapture Fever: Why Dispensationalism is Paralyzed* (Tyler, Tex.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1993).

3. "Gary North in Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., 'The Greatness of the Great Commission,' *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Winter, 1981), 34.

4. George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago, Moody, 1972), 211.

5. Cited in Joseph M. Canfield, "The Delusion of Imminence!," Discussion Paper "No. 3 (June 30, 1988), 1.

6. In *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 149 (October-December 1992), 471-479.

Dispensationalism in Transition is published monthly by the Institute for Christian Economics, P.O. Box 8000, Tyler, TX 75711. The right to reprint a single issue of this newsletter in any dated periodical is hereby authorized, under these conditions: it must be reprinted in full, and the source, including its current mailing address, must be included at the beginning or the end of the reprinted article. No authorization is hereby given to reprint any issue in a book.