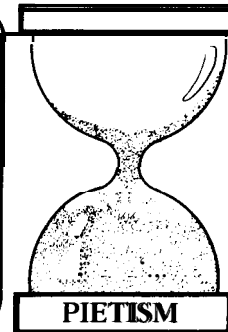


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



Vol. VIII, No. 7

©Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., 1994

August, 1994

IS TRANSITION INIMICAL TO DISPENSATIONALISM?

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

As I work on this newsletter I can sympathize with Paul's indecision on one occasion. Were I writing to the Philippians I might write the following: "I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart and deal with progressive dispensationalists, which is far better: nevertheless, to continue wrestling with classic dispensationalism, is more needful to you."

After Paul wrote of his vacillation he soon wrote an anti-classic dispensational letter entitled: "Epistle to the Ephesians." In fact, he was so concerned with this Zionistic problem that he informed John the Apostle, who wrote Revelation to counteract rampant futurism. And an unknown friend of his wrote the "Epistle to the Hebrews" to show Christianity is the fulfillment of Judaism. As Paul Harvey would say, "Now you know the rest of the story."

The Times, They are A Changin'

Classic dispensationalism is falling upon hard times, as I mentioned in my March newsletter and as Gary North recently demonstrated in his *Rapture Fever*. The wave of the future is *progressive* dispensationalism; the splash of the past is *classic* dispensationalism. Progressive dispensationalism is beginning to draw away the new generation dispensational scholars, men willing to dialogue with reformed theologians without taking their shoe off, pounding the desk, and crying: "We will bury you unless you help us bury Hebrew version Bibles in Israel." Men such as Robert Saucy, Craig Blaising, Darrell Bock, and others. In addition, it is reformatting the thought processes of some of the older ones, such as John S. Feinberg.

Yet - and this is a big problem - these progressives are not on the best-seller lists of major Christian book publishers. You do not need a shoe horn to wedge their books back onto the prophecy shelves in local Christian bookstore-trinket shops. They do not offer the popular prophecy conferences with movies, multi-media presentations, slides, charts, graphs, diagrams, photos, pictures, illustrations, and so forth.

They have a cliff icult time selling their bumper stickers: "1 n case of Rapture this car will be unmanned" has a greater marketability than "Come let us reason together." These poor scholars do not have books they wrote in the 1970s about the oil crisis - books that could be redesigned and re-issued during the Saddam Hussein debacle (e.g., Walvoord, *Armageddon, Oil, and the Middle East Crisis*). They lack systematic treatises than can be downsized and re-packaged (and corrected without notice) (e.g., Pentecost's *Things to Come* becomes *Thy Kingdom Come*).

... But Not Fast Enough

Go into any Christian bookstore and try to find serious works on eschatology. Works that do not identify the ten toes,

as if it were a Hollywood Squares game..., Or attempt to decipher facial birth marks, as if Mikhail Gorbachev didn't have enough problems growing up. Or dogmatically proclaim the arrival of Antichrist, by using newspaper clippings. Try to sift through the books on the heavy laden-prophecy bookshelves to find books without yo-yo charts of Christ's comings and goings, to and from heaven; *Time* magazine photos on Eastern Europe civil wars, with hand-scrawled notes: "I told you so"; and close-up photos of boils in living color.

Of course, with a good deal of hard work you may come up with a book or two. But be careful of the spider webs on them! I cannot even get my dispensationalist uncle who owns the largest Christian bookstore in Chattanooga (Lanham's) to carry my books. I am an embarrassment to the family: I actually educate my children for the long-run.

For the most part pop-prophecy experts (Itching Ears Relief nectar distributors) have inundated the shelves with odd-ball books that do little more than embarrass the Christian faith with absurd newspaper analyses and failed prognostications (as if the televangelist debacle and the Roman Catholic priest sex abuse scandal weren't enough!).

A Trip to Dizzy World

In preparing this issue I drove all the way over to Haywood Mall here in Greenville, South Carolina, to check out a nice, modern Christian bookstore. I found only a couple of scholarly prophecy works: Pentecost's *Things to Come* and Ryrie's *Dispensationalism Today* (which needs to be re-titled *Dispensationalism Yesterday*). But, needless to say, there was a sizeable prophecy section. Consider the titles of these dispensationalist works, some old, some new. If a title is not worth a thousand words, then usually the cover illustrations are:

- *The Late Great Planet Earth and 1980s: Countdown to Armageddon*. These books still sell - despite the sixth anniversary of the passing of 1988, the fortieth year after 1948!

- *Kept from the Hour*. The irony of this title was that I thought how I had wasted my lunch hour coming to the Mall to look at all of these ridiculous titles.

- *Dateline Earth*. Now I am getting frustrated. At least at the grocery store you get datelines from other planets.

- *Peace, Prosperity and the Coming Holocaust*. Dave Hunt is still hunting for the Rapture and becoming prosperous doing it. He will die in old age one day, whether he likes it or not.

- *Ready to Rebuild: The Imminent Plan to Rebuild the Last Days Temple*. Given the dispensational view of imminency, this could take 2000 years.

- *HOW Close Are We?* This book made me glad I used Dial soap. But its author's name reminded me of his first best-

seller, *The Seduction of Christianity*. How appropriate.

- *Gorbachev: Has the Real Anti-Christ Come? I started to write a book in response and entitle it: No.*

- *Armageddon: Appointment with Destiny*. I wish the sub-title had been written by George McFly of *Back to the Future*, then it would have been accurate: *Appointment with Density*.

- *No Fear of the Storm*. At first I thought it was Ralph Nader's endorsement of GM's Geo car, with Ralphie trying to make amends for his attacks on the Corvair. No such luck.

- *Prophecy 2000*. Sixth edition ! Maybe they've gotten it right now. Sadly there are probably dispensationalists out there who own all six editions. And can't wait for the next six. But then they are getting close to 666!

- *The Final Curtain*. I wish!

- *The King is Coming*. I had hoped it was about Elvis sightings; they are more believable than the classic dispensationalist scenarios.

- *World News and Bible Prophecy*. I checked to see if it was dated during World War 1, World War II, the Six Day War, or the Persian Gulf War so I would know which news they were talking about.

Other titles wedged on the shelves and being fought over by innocent-looking Christians included: *Storming Toward Armageddon*; *Prince of Darkness: The Anti-Christ and the New World Order*; *One World Under Antichrist Global Peace and the Rise of Antichrist The Mark of the Beast*; *The Master Plan* On and on I could go, ad nauseam. As the customers in the bookstore hauled them to the cash register I could only strike my breast and say, "God, I thank You that I am not like other men; gullible, incautious, credulous, or even as this book collector. I read books with footnotes and do not read the newspaper for devotions."

I don't know why I am constantly amazed, After all, serial killers can sell their life stories and become rich. The fact that *Armageddon/Antichrist/New World Order* books could become big sellers could only happen in America. My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.

By the way, I do not want to mis-represent the situation: the bookstore did carry one amillennial work, which is unusual today. That work was Harold Camping's book entitled 1994? Need I say more? I think it only fair that an amillennialist reap some of the profits from the market.

Now to My Main Point

Recall my opening few paragraphs about the change occurring within dispensationalism. What's a poor newsletter writer to do? The brain drain is definitely flowing in the direction of progressive dispensationalism. This is where the good stuff is being written. But the book-buying public is blissfully unaware and totally unconcerned: someone has poured Drano in their ears while they slept, An enemy bath done this!

There certainly is coming a paradigm shift, though. When the Christian public is embarrassed for the last time. When they finally tire of getting on the last train out. Again.

There is a major shift going on in dispensationalism. And this very fact is destructive of dispensational credibility, irrespective of the nature of the shift (which I will get to in the future - barring the Rapture, of course). Let me explain.

Frequently, when we note that dispensationalism is in transition, the come-back is along the following lines: "What's

the problem? Don't all theological systems tend to develop and refine themselves over time? How is the mere fact of dispensational emendations detrimental to dispensationalism, if it is not to other systems?" There is an important reason why such a response is not helpful for classic dispensationalists.

That reason is: No other system has screamed so loudly for so long about the merits of their "plain interpretation of Scripture." They merely take Scripture at "face value." We evil covenantal Christians do not "rightly divide the word of truth." We adopt the hermeneutic of liberalism and throw out simple literalism. Let me document this, then make my point.

The dispensational hermeneutic is relaxingly simple and refreshingly normal. Ryrie writes: "The principle might also be called normal interpretation since the literal meaning of words is the normal approach to their understanding in all languages. It might also be designated plain interpretation...." Notice the reference to "plain interpretation." Nothing fancy. Very simple, plain vanilla. Anyone can do it! The dispensational methodology is plain on the very surface of things. "Take heart, for Revelation can be understood. The natural response is: I-low? How do we make sense out of all those beasts and thrones and horsemen and huge numbers like 200 million? Answer: Take it at face value."²

Thus, plain, face-value hermeneutics leads to harmony and consistency: "If, then, these special principles which concern interpretation of prophecy are consistent with the basic law of hermeneutics, that is, literal interpretation, and if they point the way to a comprehensive, consistent, and harmonious system of Biblical interpretation, then premillennialism rests on an exceedingly firm basis in relation to hermeneutics."³

In fact, this approach to interpretation is for classic dispensationalists a *sine qua non*. That is, it is of the very essence of their system of thought. They have, they think, a normal, face-value system that leads to a consistent, harmonious system.

Now if this were true (and it is not) then we would not expect so plain, normal, and simple an interpretive methodology to allow change and emendation. Do we change our view of 2+2=4? Is it not plain, simple, and face-value obvious? Why should we amend this proposition?

Thus, when we complain that dispensationalism is in transition, we are pointing out that such is unexpected based on its own *sine qua non*. Such a simple, self-evident system should need no changes; it should not be prone to evolutionary advances, But it is.

The Scriptures are not so easy to take at face-value. The dispensationalist system is not as well integrated as we are led to believe. Despite Walvoord's loud comment, interpretive problems remain: "Unmistakably, the evidence is overwhelming that God means exactly what He says as prophecy after prophecy has already been literally fulfilled."⁴

²Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), 87

³Charles C. Ryrie, *The Living End* (Old Tappan, N. J.: Revell, 1976), 37..

⁴Charles C. Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune, N.J.: Loizeaux, 1953), 40.

⁵John F. Walvoord, *The Prophecy Knowledge Handbook* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1990), 7