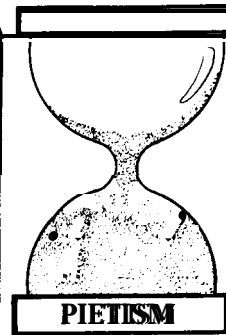


# Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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## RECONSTRUCTIONISM V. DISPENSATIONALISM

### A Response to Dr. Robert L. Thomas (Part 2)

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

Last month I began an informal response to Master's Seminary professor Robert L. Thomas' critical analysis of my book *Before Jerusalem Fell*. His insightful critique is entitled: "An Assessment of Kenneth L. Gentry's Internal Evidence for Dating Revelation" (presented December, 1993, to the Pre-Trib Study Group) (hereinafter: RLT). I now continue my response.

In this installment I want to consider a major system conflict between Reconstructionism and Dispensationalism. I do so because Thomas brings it out as germane to the early-date/late-date debate as engaged by Reconstructionists.

#### Gloom, Despair, and Agony on Me

Gloom, despair, and agony on me is the essence of the dispensational expectation in contemporary history. There is no escaping this gloomy analysis of this development of Church history - even when the dispensationalist attempts such. How often in dispensational responses to our charges of pessimism do we hear loud denials. In the famous dispensational work *Pilgrim's Regress*, we read:

"Mr. Dispensationalist denied with an oath, 'I do not know the doctrine!' And after a while those who stood by came to him and said to him, 'Surely you also are one of those pessimists, because your speech, over-sized laminated wall chart, newspaper clippings, and the Elmer's glue in your hair betray you. Then he began to curse and swear, saying, 'I do not know the doctrine!' And immediately Garius Northus published three books. And Mr. Dispensationalist remembered the word of Mr. Postmillennialist who had said to him, 'Before Garius Northus writes three books in response, you will deny the doctrine three times.' Then he went out and complained bitterly" (loosely adapted from Matt. 26:72-75)."

Early on in Thomas' critique (paragraphs 6-7) he broadsides me for my historical optimism rooted in postmillennialism. His doing so reminds me of a distinctly amillennial review of *Before Jerusalem Fell*, where the same approach was taken. Amillennialist Stuart R. Jones writes: "There is a very definite purpose in this . . . . If one can demonstrate that prophesied times of tribulation for the church and world were largely fulfilled in Nero's persecution and Titus' destruction of the temple (A.D. 70 and before), then pessimists must stand aside, Dating Revelation at the end of Domitian's reign (A.D. 96) retains the obstacle or keeps the end time picture more muddled. One might argue that Revelation has been largely fulfilled, but Titus' siege cannot be used to explain the prophesies [sic]. This weakens the argument for preterism

(present [sic!]) rather than future fulfillment), and leaves room for pessimism" [sic, and I do not mean sic!]. (*New Horizons*, February, 1991, 23)

Let me cite extensively from Thomas' statements on page 2 of his critique of *Before Jerusalem Fell*:

*Behind this exegetical methodology lies a pre-understanding that controls the whole process . . . . Gentry tries to shield his preunderstanding from view most of the time, but it shows itself once early in the book and then in the book's concluding remarks. After quoting Ryrie's words about the inevitable misery that the future holds for the world, he writes, "If such is the case, why get involved?" He associates cultural defeatism and retreatist pietism with assigning a late date to Revelation and wants to date the book before A.D. 70 so as to have Biblical support for the implementation of long-term Christian cultural progress and dominion.*

*This probably reflects his basic motivation for the early dating of Revelation: a desire for an undiluted rationale to support Christian social and political involvement. He is looking for an escape from the tension between the cultural mandate given to Christians and a realization that the prophecy of Revelation dictates that the culture will inevitably go downhill despite the best efforts of God's people to reverse the trend. No one can deny that Christians are to be good citizens by doing everything they can to make this world a better place, but the fact remains that evil will eventually prevail until the end of history when Christ returns. This is apparently a paradox with which Gentry cannot live, so his exegetical methodology moves in a direction that finds Revelation's prophecies of a decaying society fulfilled in the era up to and including the fall of Jerusalem in A. L. 70. (RLT, 2)*

When the dispensationalist complains that he is not a pessimist, you should cite this statement by Thomas. And the one by Ryrie that Thomas cites from my work. And scores of others that litter the bookshelves of Christian bookstores. Though they hate being classified as pessimists, they nevertheless are! But let me provide a surrejoinder to the particulars in the context of defending my book.

#### Only Half the Story!

First, an immediately available response should be quite obvious: What about all those pre-A.D. 70 advocates who are not Reconstructionists or even postmillennialist? A number of these are cited in *BJF* (pp. 31-38). Thomas' remarks may (will!) score points with dispensationalists as a damaging observation, This is because they tend to write as if only Recon-

structionists hold to early-date advocacy.

Interestingly, the extreme preterist viewpoint (which I deny) is experiencing much growth. From what I can gauge, many of these are historically pessimistic, in that they cannot allow future fulfillment of postmillennial hope passages.

Jay Adams (*The Time Is at Hand*) and Cornelis Vanderwaal (*Search the Scriptures*, vol. 10) have written strong conservative and reformed amillennial defenses of a preterist and pre-A.D. 70 approach to Revelation. And both of these are avowed pessimistic anti-postmillennialists.

### ...Or Perhaps, One-fourth of the Story!

Second, I also hold to a pre-A.D. 70 dating of all the New Testament canon. I have exegetical and historical reasons that are *totally* unrelated to my eschatological hope. In fact, such a position is wholly unnecessary for postmillennialism - and even for preterism (except for, perhaps, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*).

But there are, of course, theological implications of such a position. Foremost among them is my strong commitment to the integrity of Scripture, which leads to a resistance to late-dating the New Testament beyond the apostolic era. In other words, my theological pre-disposition to the inerrancy and authority of Scripture does exercise a presuppositional control over my thinking. Nevertheless, I cannot imagine how a pre-A.D. 70 dating of the other twenty-six books of the New Testament can be attributed to *postmillennial* necessities. There are none, as far as I can tell.

As an aside, I highly recommend an excellent work to my readers. This work defends a *pre-A.D. 55* dating of the Synoptic Gospels. That work, which shows *absolutely no* tendency toward postmillennialism, is: John Wenham, *Redating Matthew, Mark, & Luke: A Fresh Assault on the Synoptic Problem* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992). It retails for \$21.95 but may be ordered from Great Christian Books for \$12.40 (1-800-775-5422).

### Postmillennial Variations

*Third*, it is both theoretically possible and historically evident that postmillennialism can hold to a futurist perspective on Revelation, which is wholly unrelated to a pre-A.D. 70 date of composition. Of course, I do not accept this viewpoint, but it can and has been held by postmillennialists. Let me explain.

Even in my brand of postmillennialism there is a place at the end of history where a brief rebellion against Christian culture will occur. There are theological reasons for this final rebellion,<sup>2</sup> but the exegetical justification is found in 2 Thessalonians 1:7ff and Revelation 20:7-9, as well as other passages. Both futurists and preterists affirm that the judgments of Revelation occur in a compacted time-frame - three and one-half years (e.g., Rev. 11:1-3) - and are not to cover the entirety of New Covenant history (as per the historicist viewpoint),

Thus, as a postmillennialist I *could* hold to a *future* eventuation of the events of Revelation at the climax of history. Therefore, I could hold to an A.D. 96 date of composition. Of course, were I to do such I would have to torture the *Sitz im Leben* and put the time-frame indicators in Revelation on the rack, as per standard dispensational and amillennial practice.

But, *theoretically* it could be done and both a late-date for Revelation and postmillennialism maintained.

### The Myth of Neutrality

*Fourth*, are we to believe that Thomas holds no bias when he comes to his position? Although we all ought to carefully weigh our pre-theoretical commitments, we cannot escape them. This is the error of non-presuppositional apologetics and the strength and glory of the transcendental apologetic of Cornelius Van Til.

I do not for a moment believe that Thomas or any other interpreter is absolutely unbiased. In fact, knowing the school that sends him his monthly paycheck, it would be extremely difficult for him to escape the safe haven of his dispensational bias. Dispensationalists, more than adherents to any other theological system of thought, have historically been quite vigorous in their denunciation of other (more historically justifiable) viewpoints.

Furthermore, note the clarity of Thomas' pessimism. It seems that such a vigorous commitment "controls the whole process" of his own formulation (RLT, 2). From the long citation above we note Thomas speaking of "the inevitable misery that the future holds for the world," "a realization that the prophecy of Revelation dictates that the culture will inevitably go downhill" [but he can only prove this for a three and one-half year period, KLG], and "the fact remains that evil will eventually prevail until the end of history when Christ returns." This view of history is a "fact," an "inevitable" fact, a "realization." Inevitable facts tend to control one's thinking.

In addition, note how seldom he could find reference to my postmillennialism in *BJF*. He discovered it "once early in the book and then in the book's concluding remarks" (RLT, 2). In light of this major objection of Thomas, one would expect more vigorous elucidation of my postmillennial commitment. But I happen to know that my commitment to the early-date of Revelation is an historical-critical issue rather than an eschatological-cultural issue. My early postmillennial influences - Loraine Boettner, David Brown, and B. B. Warfield - are late-date advocates.

### Addendum

For more information on Revelation and/or postmillennialism, you may order from me at 46 Main St., Conestee, SC 29636, the following tapes: *Preterism or Futurism?* (informal debate, 1 tape: \$5); *Dispensationalism or Postmillennialism?* (informal radio discussion, 1 tape: \$5); *Interpreting Revelation* (5 tapes: \$23); *Seminar Survey of Revelation* (4 tapes: \$20); *Notebook*: \$2); *Bob Jones Univ. Student Questions Postmillennialism* (1 tape: \$5); *Postmillennialism and Preterism* (4 tapes: \$20); *The Beast, Daniel 9, and Postmillennialism* (Radio talk show, 1 tape: \$5); *The Postmillennial Hope* (4 tapes: \$20); *Major Bible Prophecies* (5 tapes: \$23). Or order the whole set for \$100, a savings of \$28. Collect all nine titles! Be the first on your block! A chart of the route Hal Lindsey takes to the bank each semi-annual royalty payment date will be included with our first order! So don't delay! (Especially if you are a dispensationalist!)

<sup>1</sup>Tommy Ice: This is a joke intended only for the reader's pleasure. Do not accuse me of citing a work that does not properly reflect mainline dispensationalism.

<sup>2</sup>See Gary North, *Dominion and Common Grace* (Tyler, Tex.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1987).

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