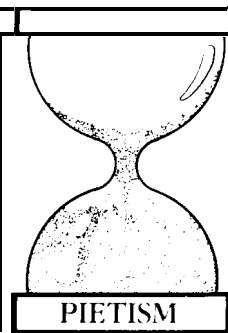


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



Vol. IX, No. 1

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January, 1995

BEAUTY OR THE BEAST?

Dressing Up Dispensationalism

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

A proverb is a short pithy statement of truth. Such an adage is intended to relate significant information in a succinct and clever manner. Two old sayings that come to my mind as I prepare this newsletter are: "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder" and "(One man's junk is another man's treasure." Such old sayings well express (metaphorically) what we are now experiencing in eschatological circles. Let me explain.

Old line or "classic" dispensationalists - i.e., Ryrie, Walvoord, Pentecost types - are running in horror at what they perceive to be a Frankenstein monster dragging about their neighborhoods (e.g., Dallas Seminary, Talbot Seminary, Christian Book and Trinket Shops, and so forth). The Frankenstein being created before their very eyes is now known as "Progressive Dispensationalism." And what is worse, it is being created out of their own decaying body parts!

Classic Dispensationalists see in the Progressive Dispensationalist an amalgamated, zipper-faced creature. They fearfully lift up their voices and cry out: "He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him. He is despised and rejected by us. And we hide, as it were, our faces from Him; He is despised, and we do not esteem Him." (Hey! I wonder if this is a double-fulfillment of prophecy? I will have to look into this a little more carefully.)

Yet this so-called Progressive Dispensationalist "monster" really has the makings of a smartly-dressed, twentieth-century evangelical theologian. When compared to the Neanderthal Classic Dispensationalist, that is. Now don't get me wrong. Speaking as a reformed Christian, Progressive Dispensationalism is blind-date material, to be sure. But it is much more theologically becoming in comparison to the rotting corpse from which it is being made. Reformed and evangelical Christians are sitting up and taking notice with delight: Cosmetic surgery is being performed on dispensationalism! (Unfortunately, in later newsletters we will discover the validity of another aphorism: "Beauty is only skin deep, but ugly is to the bone.")

This new progressive dispensationalism is looking *much* better, I am Impressed! Out with the old and in with the new! This is the New Year, after all! It seems that after all those years of rubbing shoulders with Reformed theologians in evangelical circles, some dispensationalists are beginning to shape up their act. As evangelical theologians read the literature of the Progressive Dispensationalists they "perceive that they are uncovenantal and discontinuity men, yet they marvel, for they realize that they have been with Reformed evangelical."

Beginning with this issue we will begin dealing more with

the creature known as Progressive Dispensationalism than with Classic Dispensationalism. As in the world of computers, you have to keep up with the times: I could never turn back to my 386/25 4MB computer now that I have experienced my new Pentium/90 with 16 MB of memory!

Progressive Dispensationalism is a remarkable and growing phenomenon. As informed Christians we need to ask, "What manner of man is this? For he commands even the seminaries and dispensational publishing houses, and they obey him!" Dallas Seminary is changing in this new direction and Talbot Seminary changed long ago; and major evangelical publishers are publishing their books. And this despite the fact that not one of their books has a four-color chart *or* predicts the end of the world by the time their first royalty check is due! Neither do their authors dress up like Indiana Jones and sit at an archaeological site as if rebuilding a Temple!

The Rapture Question

Our first order of business as we enter the Brave New World of Progressive Dispensationalism is to notice that something remarkable is, in fact, happening. We are witnessing a paradigm shift within dispensationalism. Although it is largely going on at the top (among the theologians), it will not be too long before it trickles down to the Christians in the pew. Give them a few more Hal Lindsey failed predictions and they will be eager to save face without changing names.

Whereas Walvoord once pondered the "Rapture Question," we now are pondering the "Rapture Question," That is, the *rupture* that is occurring within once monolithic dispensationalism. In days of old there was the Scofield Reference Bible which helped co-ordinate the thoughts of this movement. My uncle, a dispensationalist pastor, is even so enamored with the SRB that he would often simply call out a page number rather than the biblical reference! When I went to his church, *everyone* had Scofield Reference Bibles. Nowadays, though, there are competitors: The Ryrie Reference Bible, The Criswell Study Bible, and so forth. The crack is in the dike. Fragmentation begins with the diversification of authoritative reference points.

Though there are numerous indicators of the "imminent rupture," three particular events of the last few years indicate the seriousness of this "secret rupture": (1) The formation of the Pre-Trib Study Group; (2) Ryrie's loud disavowal of death in *issues in Dispensationalism*¹; and (3) a recent impressive article by Darrell Bock published in *Christianity Today*. Let me survey these three evidences of dispensationalism's painful rupture so that we can get our temporal bearings.

Dispensational Old Folks Home

In December, 1992, thirty-one dispensationalists met together for a three-day discussion of how best to circle the dispensational wagons without crashing into one another. The attacks of Reconstructionists from without and the defections of progressives from within were threatening their book sales and speaking engagements. What is worse it was reducing the amount of Christian funds flowing into Israel to help rebuild the Temple (via the Jerusalem Temple Foundation).² The result is what is known as The Pre-Trib Study Group. (No, I did not make up this name!)

Tim LaHaye put it well in the "Pre-Trib Perspectives" newsletter (1: 1) entitled "The Pre-Trib Research Center: A New Beginning": "Our purpose is to awaken in the Body of Christ a new awareness of the soon coming of Jesus" (p. 1). They see their view slip-slidin' away, as Paul Simon might put it. Christians need to be "awakened" to a "new awareness."

(A funny thing about this article was that I received it the same day I received a letter from Tommy Ice. In Ice's letter he was loudly decrying the Reconstructionist confusion of "(soon)" and "imminent" regarding the dispensational view of Christ's Return. Ice mockingly proclaimed to me in his second sentence: '(We distinguish between imminent and soon in the sense that soon would require a near coming, while imminent would allow, but not require a soon coming. But, your [sic] supposed to know these things, So are those in our (dispensationalist) camp, but they do not always put into practice such a distinction,' Now get this: It was Tommy Ice who was interviewing Tim LaHaye in the newsletter just cited, where LaHaye proudly proclaims the "soon" coming of Christ! No wonder they have no credibility!)

But I have mentioned this PTSG Syndrome before, Let us move on to our second illustration of the painful grimacing associated with the rupture of dispensationalism.

On Being Heard for Much Speaking

A sure sign of a dying breed is the loudness of their denial of imminent (or should I say, "soon?") death. Those who have been around a dying person will recognize the chilling nature of life's "last gasp."

In 1994 Moody Press published a book, *Issues in Dispensationalism*, edited by Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master and under the editorship of Charles Ryrie. The book itself is enough to give evidence of the room temperature of the *theological* corpse of dispensationalism. But the back cover serves as a nicely chiseled tombstone for all to see.

On this cover we read in bold, all-caps, colored print Ryrie's words from his '(1 ntroductory Word": "DISPENSATIONALISM DYING? HARDLY - READ ON," This is a veritable post-mortem! These words point to the grave so that people can visit the tomb, like signs at Graceland do for visitors of Elvis. Of course, all the cells have yet to die in this classic *dispensationalism* creature, i.e. book-buying lobotomist Christians still exist.

The cover goes on to say: "Though many in the theological community are saying that dispensationalists are a dying breed, *Issues in Dispensationalism* demonstrates that dispensationalism is alive and well today," The paler of death colors this statement. I am currently reviewing this book for The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society. Being a

grave plot it also is a mine of resource materials.

Embarrassing Family Members

The third line of evidence is Darrell L. Bock's article entitled "Charting Dispensationalism," which was published in *Christianity Today*, (38: 10 [September 12, 1994] 26-29). His associate at Dallas Seminary, Craig Blaising, published a similar article in an issue of *Southwestern Journal of Theology* (36:2 [Spring, 1994] 5-13). The article in *Christianity Today* is more important due to its wider, popular circulation. But both of these are excellent introductions to "progressive dispensationalism" and the dispensational paradigm shift. I recommend your calling the inter-library loan desk of your local public library and requesting copies of these.

For us to really get our bearings in order to track this Frankenstein creature, we need to review the article, which I will do beginning next month. As we study the issue, you will be favorably impressed with the '(new and improved" dispensationalism. You will see why the residents of the Dispensationalist geriatric ward are trembling. It almost makes you believe in evolution's maxim that change (even by mutational forces!) is always for the better, Almost.

An Update on Christ College

Before closing, let me bring my readers up-to-date on Christ College. A good number of you have written about this important Reconstructionist venture.

We just finished our third semester in Greenville, S.C. Two years ago we had five students. Last year we had thirteen students. This past semester we had seventeen; five girls and twelve guys. When I reported these figures to Gary North, he commented: "At that rate of growth, in a couple of hundred years you ought to have a billion students!" I can't wait!

Our students are from California, Wyoming, Florida, Ohio, Virginia, South Carolina, and Pennsylvania. Courses taught this past semester were: **Gentry**: Computer Literacy; New Testament Survey I; and Ecclesiology. **Jerry Crick**, Th.D.: Introduction to Philosophy; Old Testament Survey I; Philosophy of Science. **Michael Mang**, Th.D. cane.: Beginning Greek III, **Greg Bahnsen**: History of Western Philosophy.

This semester we are offering: **Kevin Clauson**, J. D.: Introduction to Law and Government. **Roger Schultz**, Ph. D.: History of Western Civilization II, **Carl Curtis**, Ph. D.: Western Literature II. **Jerry Crick**: OT Survey II; Comparative Religions and Philosophies I. **Michael Mang**: Beginning Greek IV. Gentry Eschatology; NT Survey II; Research and Publication.

Pray for us! We are in a growth mode! Write: Dr. Jerry Crick, Christ College, P.O. Box 9084, Greenville, SC 29604.

'I am not guilty of a mixed metaphor when I speak of the "secret rupture" by reference to Ryrie's "loud" disavowal. " I am speaking according to the pattern of "dispensational truth." Remember: the passage used to prove the "secret" rapture is the noisiest passage in Scripture: "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God, And the dead in Christ will rise first" (1 Thess. 4:16).

'Don Stewart and Chuck Missler, *The Coming Temple: Center Stage for the Fins/ Countdown* (Orange, Cal.: Dart, 1991), Ch. 8: "A Christian Connection."

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