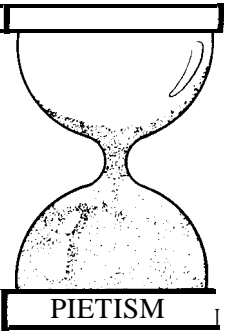


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



Vol. IX, No. 2

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February, 1995

NEW AND IMPROVED DISPENSATIONALISM

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

Last month I began turning my attention to the new and improved **dispensationalism**. This new school of dispensational thought, known as '(progressive dispensationalism,' is fast displacing old line **dispensationalism**. In a few years classic dispensationalism of the Walvoord/Ryrie/Pentecost type will be as hard to find as an original (un-re-edited) *Scofield Reference Bible*. I suppose by the turn of the century -if we make it that long; the signs are so clear now that Oh excuse, me I got caught up Lindsey's latest book! - the *New Scofield Reference Bible* will be replaced by the *Newest Scofield Reference Bible*. (I will recommend the red chart edition.)

As I indicated last month, I will begin a review of an important article appearing by Darrell L. Bock, Professor of New Testament Studies, Dallas Theological Seminary. The article entitled "Charting Dispensationalism," appeared in *Christianity Today* on September 12, 1994 (pp. 26-29). It is a very helpful introduction to the evolutionary changes occurring within dispensationalism. Though Bock *et al.* prefer to view the changes as "evolutionary," I agree with Walvoord and Ryrie (surprise! surprise!) that the changes are more Marxian, i.e. "revolutionary," I highly recommend your securing a copy of this article through your local library.

In a faded gray backdrop image behind the title, the clever CT editors provide a reproduction of one of Clarence Larkin's tacky little charts. Depending on your commitments, Larkin's charts are either: (1) amazing (if you are a dispensationalist); (2) amusing (if you are a non-dispensationalist); or (3) amalgamating (if you are a chemist and apply mercury and stir vigorously). When one thinks of popular, book-store variety dispensationalism, he immediately has visions of charts dancing in his head. This is because dispensationalism has made its impact widely felt through its *apocalypticism*. That is, no matter when the dispensational writer is writing - whether back at the beginning of dispensationalism in the early 1800s or today in the mid-1990s - he is absolutely certain that biblical prophecies are coming to fulfillment in his own time. So he must quickly provide an assured chart to plot the order of events (after all, his publishing agent demands the latest charts),

The summary heading under Bock's title reads: "A group of progressive scholars is mapping out a dispensational theology for a new era."¹ We can no longer accurately apply the term "dispensational" to a book, theologian, or school; we must now be more careful in that there are widely divergent varieties available. As Bock puts it: "Critics tend to treat dispensationalism as a monolith, but we knew better" (p. 26). This harmonizes well with a recent classic dispensational admission. In a book entitled *Issues in Dispensationalism* (Moody, 1994), editors Wesley R. Willis and John R. Masters note in

their Preface: "At one time those who described themselves as 'dispensationalists' generally agreed upon the meaning of the term *dispensationalism*. However, today there seem to be wide differences of opinion concerning key features of the system" (p. 11).

Bock's Requiem Mesa

The opening sentences to this article are quite significant and reveal something of the pain of being a dispensational theologian (and Bock is one of the finer ones): "I am a dispensationalist. And that means I've got a bad reputation with many evangelical" (p. 26). An article opening in this manner is an expression of some concern and embarrassment. It sounds like one's introduction at his first Alcoholics Anonymous meeting.

Bock laments that some erroneous positions are applied to dispensationalism through "misinformation and misunderstanding." I can sympathize with that, Try being a reconstructionist in the Presbyterian Church in America! I have been accused of believing circumcision is necessary for salvation! And wanting to take over government to exterminate all non-Christian Americans! Try reading House and Ice's *Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse*. That work is virtually a *National Enquirer* approach to theological analysis,

Yes, Darrell, there is a Hal Lindsey

But Bock admits the problem is worse than **misinformational**: many wildly popular dispensationalists are themselves sources of embarrassment to upper-crust dispies. After listing certain erroneous theological positions, Bock concedes that "any one of these views, or some combination of them, might be found in some pockets of dispensationalism, but they do not fairly characterize the tradition as a whole" (p. 26). He later names names: he laments Lindsey-type *apocalypticism*: "This [older] type dispensationalism also popularized apocalyptic readings of the Bible in terms of current history. The best-known examples are Hal Lindsey's books on prophecy, which, in the seventies, ranked among the biggest selling popular books on religion of all time" (p. 28),

I can even sympathize somewhat with this form of articular sobbing. There are definitely some screwballs in reconstructionist circles who speak outlandish things. All systems of theology have some loose canons on deck. But the problem for Bock, Blaising, Saucy, and other progressive **dispensationalists** is bigger. Much bigger. Their problem is not loose canons on deck, but loose deck under canons. Let me explain what I mean,

Bock attempts to brush Lindseyish apocalypticism aside: "While the most visible, this emphasis within dispensationalism

has represented only a small portion of the tradition's theological concern" (p. 28). But because of the incredibly popular and widespread apocalyptic writings of multi-million copy best-selling books by Lindsey, Hunt, Jeffries, and others, dispensationalism is *dominated* by extremist naivete. We are talking of massive Christian public feeding frenzies on this pabulum! Bock knows that old line "dispensationalism has contributed mightily to evangelicalism in the twentieth century, popularizing the prophetic message of the Bible . . . and providing many leaders to churches and para-church organizations" (p. 26). And it is the Lindsey sort of approach that has dominated.

From Bock's statement (given at the first of the preceding paragraph) it is hard to tell exactly what he means. Does he mean (1) apocalypticism has been held only by a *small number* of dispensational writers? Or does he mean (2) apocalypticism is only one part of dispensationalism's "theological concern"? If he means the first, he is probably wrong. Or at least irrelevantly and debatably correct. The massive influence of the apocalyptic tract writers from W.E. Blackstone to Hal Lindsey cannot so simply be swept aside. If he means the second, he has made a fatal admission: apocalyptic tendencies are inherent in dispensationalism as a part of its theology. What classic dispensationalists see as a rare delicacy and call "Sushi," others look at the same thing and see raw, dead fish.

You've Come a Long Way Dispie

Classic dispensationalists have vigorously and proudly proposed simple solutions to theological complexities. But Bock admits what his forebears would have denied with an oath: "Dispensationalist thinkers have long articulated differing views of the people of God, the kingdom 'program,' and the covenants" (p. 26).

Read Bock's statement again. This is an extremely important admission. Apparently within dispensationalism, the simple, face-value hermeneutic of Walvoord, the (alleged) system-defining *sine qua non* of Ryrie, can tolerate differing views of the identity of the people of God (God's people), the kingdom (God's mission), and the covenants (God's method) of Scripture! These are not minor detail points of Scripture. They are fundamental issues in the revelation of redemption and are of the very essence of the message of Scripture.

Bock goes on to note: "Indeed, a new and discernibly different 'progressive dispensationalism' is emerging" (p. 26). He reports that the meetings of the Dispensational Study Group (held annually in conjunction with Evangelical Theological Society meetings) have grown from twenty-four participants ten years ago to over 200 in recent meetings. At these meetings serious minded (sc. progressive) dispensation-

alists have frank discussions with covenantal theologians and others. Bock notes of these gatherings that "replacing the **bellicose spirit of earlier eras, and even among some today**, has been a climate of respectful exchange" (p. 26).

This "climate of respectful exchange" has alarmed Ryrie and other classic dispensationalists. And rightly so. Ryrie recognizes that dispensationalism is the theological position most impacted by the exchanges, leading to massive internal restructuring. Classic dispensationalists seethe handwriting on the wall: their theological worldview is collapsing through revolution. Oh sure, they will still be wealthy from book sales to a gullible public, but their worldview is heading to the dustbin of history. They will be rich, but no longer credible.

In *Issues in Dispensationalism* Ryrie notes that in discussions with covenant theologians "most of the 'give' is from dispensationalists and not from covenant people" (p. 24). That's kind of like saying in the meetings of meteors with planets most of the give is with the meteor.

The reason for the primary give being on the dispensational side is because that is where the most give is necessary. Historically considered, dispensationalism is too flawed a system to expect large concessions from covenantal theologians. Confident predictions, loud assertions, and spectacular book sales do not translate into theological truth. In fact, these probably belie a system in dire need of an overhaul. And that is precisely what dispensationalism is undergoing. (You may sing the Doxology at this point. In fact, I recommend it.)

Next month I will begin to relate Bock's history of the development within dispensationalism. You will need to be familiar with his designations.

Addendum

For those interested, I will be speaking in Aloha, OR at Reformation Covenant Church's Genevan Conference, May 19-21, 1995. Call (503) 254-2869. I will be speaking in Savannah, GA on November 3-5. Call (912) 355-3844 (Rev. Bryan Nicholson).

Materials available from me at 46 Main St., Conestee, SC 29636: Manuscripts: *Man of Lawlessness* (\$3); *Daniel's 70 Weeks* (\$3); *Book of Revelation and Eschatology* \$3; *Theonomic Ethics and the Westminster Confession of Faith* (\$2); *The Great Tribulation* (\$5); and *A Defense of Six Day Creationism from Scripture* (\$3).

¹ When I first typed this sentence I inadvertently typed "new ear" instead of "new era." Judging from the alarms and disavowal issuing forth from Walvoord and Ryrie, my first rendering may be more appropriate: Walvoord and Ryrie simply are not going to listen.

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