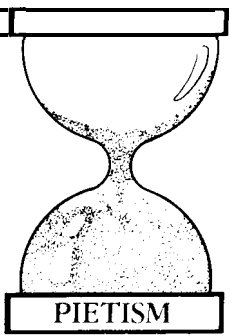


# Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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## BETWEEN A BOCK AND A HARD PLACE

by Kenneth L. Gentry, Th.D.

Let us conclude our review of Darrell Bock's *Christianity Today* article: "Charting Dispensationalism" (Sept. 12, 1994). His catchy title is matched in cleverness by a *Christianity Today* inset article within Bock's: "Dispensationalisms of the Third Kind" (p. 28).

### Dispensational Glaciation

Bock opens his survey of "progressive dispensationalism" with these words: "Out of revised dispensationalism has emerged a third form of the movement that sees even more continuity in God's plan" (p. 28). Notice that the progress in dispensational evolution, though slow like natural glaciation, has been moving *toward a covenantal continuity* in the plan of God. But the change is sure and dramatic - like the erosive change in the landscape under moving glaciers.

Bock notes that this third form of dispensationalism now has its "own identity." As might be expected, this is presently causing enormous friction, as when land-based glaciers create terminal and lateral moraines along their paths. And with this tremendous friction we are seeing consequent fragmentation within dispensationalism. Thus, the dispensational glacier is even calving, also like nature's glaciers. Dispensationalism confronts the New Age with its own Ice Age!

### Six of One, Half Dozen of the Other?

To some it seems that progressive dispensationalism is more like historic pre-millennialism. But Bock's article clearly indicates that it is not historical premillennialism warmed over, despite the probability that George Eldon Ladd would have been sympathetic.

The progressives still have a place for the concept of dispensations - and not just because their tenure depends on it (or at least I do not *think* this is why). Though moving toward more unity in the plan of God, Bock notes that "each dispensation draws from and builds on promises made in the previous era(s). Each is a distinct administrative period and should not be confused with other periods in God's plan. So, for example, Israel should not be called the church in the Old Testament, nor should the church now be viewed as simply replacing Israel in the plan of God" (p. 29). Nevertheless to maintain the highest level of glacial friction possible with classic dispensationalists: "alongside the **discontinuities** of the plan stand strong links of continuity. These notes of continuity make this form of dispensationalism more like other evangelical theological traditions" (p. 29).

Bock points out that each distinct phase of redemptive

history carries in it the "initial realization" of the following one. Progressive dispensationalists do not keep the dispensations hermetically sealed-for-your-protection. Rather they allow an initial *realization* prior to each formal beginning. This is radically different from Chafer's Scofieldian dispensationalism. Note how strong a distinction Chafer could draw between dispensations:

*The Bible provides three complete and wholly independent rules for human conduct - one for the past age... which is known as the Mosaic Law and is crystallized in the Decalogue; one for the future age of the kingdom which is crystallized in the Sermon on the Mount; and one for the present age which appears in the Gospel by John, the Acts, and the Epistles of the New Testament. (Systematic Theology, 5:98)*

I even have an ad for a commentary on Matthew, which I found in *Pulpit Helps* a few years ago. That dispensational ad stated that Matthew "has a Jewish flavor of such intensity that little in it can be applied doctrinally to Gentile believers"! Talking about "rightly dividing the word of truth"!

One aspect of this "initial realization" phenomenon that knee-caps the giant of classic dispensationalism, is its allowing the presence of the *Messianic kingdom* now through *initial realization*: "In Jesus, the Messiah, comes the initial realization of promises made to David about one who would have authority to distribute the benefits of promised deliverance to God's people" (p. 29). Thus, in some sense we are presently in the kingdom age - at least we are in its "initial realization"! This is quite a concession to *covenantal* theology. This is quite disturbing to moribund dispensationalism. This is quite fun for me. We will look a little more at this change in a future newsletter.

### Awake, Thou That sleepest!

Not only does this theoretical aspect of progressive dispensationalism exist, but it has cultural implications, as well. Gary North has (rightly) complained that dispensationalism has not produced a book on Christian social theory. Indeed, he noted that such was theoretically impossible. The problem has always been that social, cultural, or political activity by dispensationalists is without theoretical underpinning: historically their system has discounted the hope and, therefore, muted the call for social reform. When classic dispensationalists engaged in cultural confrontation, North called them "operational postmillennialist." And he was

correct. A beautiful illustration of this is the quote in George Peters' textbook, *A Theology of Missions* (Moody, p. 211):

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 of 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.

Bock recognizes this long standing criticism of "previous generations of dispensationalists" in this regard. But he notes that older dispensationalists - despite their system - tended to engage **socio-cultural** matters. Yet in progressive **dispensationalism** we have a different situation altogether. "The gospel's impact on the church's testimony to society is receiving *increased attention* within the tradition now" (p. 29 [emphasis mine]). Progressives seem to be aware of the legitimacy - and even necessity - of the evangelical and reformed charges against classic dispensationalism in this regard. With their "initial realization" theory, they feel they have theoretical grounding for cultural confrontation and reform.

### Look, Ma, No Mountain Top Experiences!

Another characteristic of the new dispensationalists is their reluctance to climb mountains to wait for the "imminent" rapture. Writes Bock: "progressive dispensationalists are more circumspect about identifying certain details in the prophetic calendar than some of their predecessors were. Looking for the 'blessed hope' of Christ's return is still a motivating feature for the believer's walk with God, but some would be less confident about the ability to lay out a detailed scenario or its contemporary fulfillment" (p. 29).

As is obvious in the eyes of anybody who has walked through a Christian bookstore on planet earth within the past seventy-five years, dispensationalism has been characterized by the wide-spread expectation among its adherents that they are definitely, absolutely, irrefutably, assuredly, positively, undeniably, undoubtedly, certainly, and unquestionably living in the absolutely very last moments - nay! *seconds* - of history. For 160 years they have been absolutely convinced they are living in the moments just before Christ's coming.

You've seen their bumper sticker: "Maybe today," (Unfortunately, I invested and lost a lot of money in producing a response bumper sticker: "Maybe not." Though I was right every time I passed a dispensationalist's car, there was no market for the sticker. If anyone would like to buy 400,000 of these, I can give you an excellent deal.) Historically **dispensationalists** have been so convinced of the imminent rapture that

I suppose when they actually die the entire first half of the trip to heaven has them confidently thinking, "See, I told you so." But when they notice only a few scattered individuals coming along with them, they look behind to discover their cars are not unmanned and off in a ditch. What a disappointment.

Thankfully the progressive position is attempting to turn dispensationalists away from cultural retreat and market sensationalism. And I hope they do so. They will *still* be operational postmillennialist, though. And we could use more operational postmillennialist.

### A Dozen Things Thou Lackest

Yet, Bock notes there are other continuities with classic dispensationalism: Progressives still believe in a future for Israel in the Land during the millennium; making a distinction between Israel and the Church; a pre-tribulational rapture; and more. We will analyze such things in a future newsletter.

Bock's article closes by noting the developing and expanding dialogue between dispensationalists and other traditions. The beginning of the Dispensational Study Group at an Evangelical Theological Society meeting nine years ago began an important set of changes within dispensationalism, making it somewhat more tolerable to non-dispensational palates. And I am thankful for those changes, Who knows what tomorrow will bring!

Perhaps a brief note regarding the CT inset review of **Blaising** and Saucy's books by Walter **Elwell** would be of interest (p. 28). I will just cite a few of his interesting observations. I think you will get the picture.

He speaks of dispensationalism's "complicated **hermeneutic** that is anything but apparent from a simple reading of the Bible," How true!

"The latest phase [of dispensationalism] is described as 'a developing tradition of biblical interpretation' rather than a static, unchanging system - a point that will come as new to those who were told that dispensationalism was true (presumably truth does not keep changing as time moves on) ."

"It is nice not to be told that virtually everyone in church history was a **dispensationalist**."

"**Blaising** and Bock concede that dispensationalism is both recent and different from most of what went before it."

### Addenda

If you are a Reconstructionist and would like to have your name listed in *The International Directory of Christian Reconstruction*, send your name, address, phone number, occupation, church name, and special interests in legible print or typed format to: Foundation for Christian Reconstruction, P.O. Box 10, St. Albans, Herts, AL3 5HA, England.

The following materials may be ordered from me at 46 Main St., Conestee, SC 29636: Study **Papers**: #SP4 "Theonomic Ethics & the Westminster Confession" (\$3); #SP7 "(Defense of Six Day Creationism from Scripture)" (\$3); #SP8 "Brief Analysis of Hyper-preterism" (\$2). **Tapes**: "Survey of Revelation" (4 tapes: \$20); "The Postmill Hope" (4 tapes: \$20); "Major Bible Prophecies" (5 tapes: \$23); "The Civil Magistrate in the Westminster Confession" (4 tapes: \$20); "The Doctrine of the Church" (1 O tapes: \$40),

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