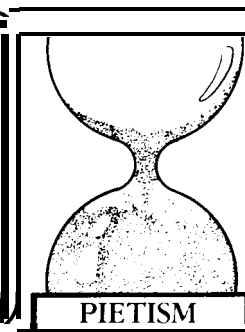


# Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



Vol. IX, No. 5

©1995 Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., Th. D.

May, 1995

## What's Saucy for the Goose . . .

by Kenneth L. Gentry, Th.D.

In 1989 Wayne House and Thomas Ice had a work published, entitled *Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse?* This book was a frontal attack on **Reconstructionism**; it hit **reconstructionism** like a bug hits a windshield, leaving an annoying mess. I am sure all readers of *Dispensationalism in Transition* are quite familiar with this work, but I want to point out an important development that House and Ice's work highlighted. Looking back from my present vantage point I see even more clearly what House and Ice were alarmed about from within their own circles.

As I read their book three things struck me: (1) An alarm clock that fell off the shelf above my desk, hitting me on the head But this is Irrelevant to my main point, so I move on. (2) The poor understanding and shoddy research that was being passed out as *the Reconstructionist* expose. But Bahnsen and I have responded to that in our *House Divided: The Break-up of Dispensation/ Theology* (available through I.C.E. for \$25). So I shuffle on once again. (3) The serious defections within dispensationalism. Some newer dispensational scholars were beginning to proclaim an innovative approach to eschatology, known as "progressive dispensationalism." This is the point I want to focus on in this newsletter.

Noting House and Ice's alarm over the existence of a dispensationalist scholar called "Saucy," I became greatly interested in the life and works of Robert L. Saucy. Saucy is distinguished professor of systematic theology at Talbot School of Theology in Los Angeles, formerly a dispensationalist school. Although he wrote a number of fine articles prior to 1989, since that time Saucy has authored or co-authored several extremely important works exposing the fragmentation in dispensationalism. Like fellow progressive dispensationalists Darrell Bock and Craig Blaising, Saucy is turning the heads of reformed and evangelical theologians with his remarkable emendations of dispensationalism. He is one of the "movers and shakers" in dispensationalism today. In Reconstructionism you have Rushdoony, North, and Bahnsen; in progressive dispensationalism you have Bock, Blaising, and Saucy.

One of Saucy's most important contributions to the theological debate is his 1993 book, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationa/ism* (Zondervan), which I highly recommend to those interested in the debate. Its stated purpose is "to bring additional clarification to a contemporary form of dispensationalism It is hoped that this will both give traditional dispensationalists a greater understanding of what some of their colleagues are saying, and aid the ongoing dialogue with non-dispensationalists" (p. 8). Reading this work has helped me understand the weeping and gnashing of teeth by House, Ice, Ryrie, Walvoord, Pentecost, Ankerberg, Barber, Vines,

Hanna, Hodges, DeHaan, Lightner, Patterson, Lindsey, La-Londe, Toussaint, Benware, Wiersbe, Dyer, Hindson, LaHaye, Jeffrey, Feinberg, Gromacki, Kent, Missler, Radmacher, and others. In this newsletter I will introduce the significance of this book by reviewing portions of its Preface and first chapter. I am sure you will stand amazed at the concessions being made by the new dispensational theologians. If we sit back long enough (and we have the time!), we may just watch them rapture into reformed theology.

### Evolutionary Dispensationalism

Saucy opens his book with these words: "Over the past several decades the system of theological interpretation commonly known as dispensationalism has undergone considerable development and refinement" (p. 8). Hence, House and Ice's alarm: that which appeared to be micro-evolution at work early on, has turned out "in these last days" to be of a macro-evolutionary character. And I use "in these last days" purposely in that Ryrie, Walvoord, et al., will surely point to such changes as evidence of a last days apostasy in the Church. If Saucy gains too big a following, they may even point to him as "the Man of Lawlessness" who desires to "sit in the Temple" of Chafer (Dallas Seminary).

Saucy notes the sources of the change: "(The impetus for change has come largely from among dispensationalists themselves as, through mutual discussion, they have felt the need to revise classic dispensationalism at several points (p.8)." This seems tautological; I do not know how it could be any other way. Why would changes in dispensationalism be effected from any other source than "among dispensationalists themselves"? Federal law, unfortunately, does not prohibit it (though, as House so perceptively notes, we do want to criminalize dispensationalists<sup>1</sup>). Neither is there any federally approved inoculation for Rapture Fever,

But Saucy goes on to admit: "The process has been aided considerably by an increasing dialogue between dispensationalists and those from non-dispensational traditions" (p. 8). That is, non-dispensational theologians have so thoroughly worn out the tired old dispensational arguments that the new generation dispensationalists are making necessary changes for the better. They are a breed apart from classic dispensationalism who are still "sweatin' to the oldies." You have to be an antique to appreciate old dispensationalists.

### Changes in Fundamentals

At the outset Saucy makes an important point that needs to be understood by all who would stand against dispensation-

alism in its every form: "the nature of the fulfillment of the prophecies concerning Israel remains the crucial issue" in the dispensational/non-dispensational debate (p. 8). In essence, Israel is *the* point of difference between dispensationalism and the rest of the evangelical world. Rather than there being a great number of distinctions, there is now basically one fundamental distinction.

This is a giant step away from Ryrie's revised dispensationalism, which was so complicated and forced. Consider Ryrie's *sine qua non*: "What marks off a man as a dispensationalist? The answer is threefold. (1) A dispensationalist keeps Israel and the Church distinct ., (2) The second aspect of the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism is the matter of plain hermeneutics. Consistently literal or plain interpretation is indicative of a dispensational approach to the interpretation of the Scriptures (3) A third aspect of the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism is a rather technical matter. It concerns the underlying purpose of God in the world. The covenant theologian in practice makes this purpose salvation, and the dispensationalist says the purpose is broader than that, namely, the glory of God."<sup>2</sup>

Today, Ryrie's analysis is no longer true. Saucy makes this point quite clearly when he notes that "the fundamental issue between dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists is neither a basic hermeneutical principle nor the ultimate purpose of human history. The basic issue is the way we understand the historical plan and the goal of that plan through which God will bring eternal glory to himself. More particularly, it is the question of the purpose and plan of God *within* human history, i.e., from this creation until the inauguration of the eternal state" (p. 20). As stated above, the *sine qua non* is now reduced to "the nature of the fulfillment of the prophecies concerning Israel" (p. 8). This is why "for many of us, references to dispensational interpretations by those not holding this position no longer speak to the real issues over which we differ" (p. 8).

### The Rapture Secretly Raptured

Despite the enamoring of classic or traditional dispensationalism with the rapture (they have made millions of dollars off the topic), Saucy notes: "The question of the time of the rapture has not been included in the work. While most dispensationalists probably [!] hold to a pretribulation rapture of the church as being in certain respects more harmonious with dispensationalism in general, many would not desire to make this a determining touchstone of dispensationalism today" (pp. 8-9).

The glorious truth of the nature of the changes within new and improved dispensationalism is that "the changes in dispensationalism have been largely in the direction of a greater continuity within God's program of historical salvation. Instead of a strict parenthesis that has no relation with the messianic kingdom prophecies of the Old Testament, many dispensationalists now acknowledge the present age of the church as the first-stage partial fulfillment of these prophecies. Israel and the church are no longer viewed as representing two different purposes and plans of God, as some earlier dispensationalists taught; they are now seen as sharing in the same messianic kingdom of salvation history. These changes have obviously brought more congruence between dispensationalism and

non-dispensationalism at many points" (p. 9),

These concessions are so remarkable that Saucy has to make an extra effort to prove that he is still a "dispensationalist" - an effort wasted on classic dispensationalists who dispute his right to fly the sacred banner, Saucy claims to be dispensational because "anyone who asserts not only the restoration of Israel as a national entity but also a future role for that nation in God's kingdom program has been generally identified as dispensationalist. The new dispensationalism retains such a future for Israel" (p. 9). This sweeping assertion could almost drag many Puritan postmillennialist down into the dispensational pit, for older postmillennialism (and some modern expressions) have a place for national Israel in the Land.<sup>3</sup>

Liberalism is now literally defunct. The goalies are no longer defending the goal, The rapture has been raptured, And what is more, the dispensations have been dispensed with! Remember Scofield's neat seven dispensations? Gone And what have the dispensations been reduced to? Two. Just like in reformed and evangelical theology

In speaking of the role of the Law of God in the post-ascension Church, Saucy notes its relevance today (though not in a theonomic sense), In doing so he comments, nevertheless, that there is a difference between the Mosaic era and the Church Age: "Because this difference can only be considered in relation to God's grace, this factor must be included to some extent in discussing the two economies of life" (p. 17), "Two economies of life"?

### Conclusion

These changes are important in two fundamental respects:

(1) They are helpful to deflate the "clear" dispensational evidence against non-dispensationalists. Too many lay "prophecy buffs" assume they are in a unified, unambiguous system, Not so! and they need to be shown this, (2) If you want to be current in your criticisms of dispensationalism, you will need to know where contemporary dispensationalism is.

For those interested, the following materials are available from me at 46 Main St., Conestee, SC 29636. (Prices include shipping,) Tape sets: #39 "The Doctrine of the Church," including critiques of the home church movement and opposition to youth fellowship (10 tapes: \$40), #49 "A Comparison of Millennial Views: WMUZ Radio Interviews Walvoord, Lillbeck, and Gentry" (1 tape: \$5). #51 "Israel in Scripture" (2 tapes: \$10). Books: *Lord of the Saved* (\$7.50). *God's Law in the Modern World* (\$5.50).

<sup>1</sup> I am kidding, Mom, (My mother reads my newsletter, so I need to be careful), But House was not kidding when he made this ridiculous charge. See: *Dominion Theology* (Portland, Ore.: Multnomah, 1988), 79.

<sup>2</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), 43-46.

<sup>3</sup> Steve Schlissel and David Brown, *Ha/ Lindsey and the Restoration of the Jews* (Edmonton, Alb.: Still Waters Revival, 1990). Schlissel is a contemporary Jewish Christian and David Brown is a noted theologian from the last century,