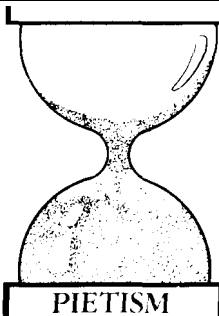




Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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EVOLVING ABSOLUTES

by Kenneth L. Gentry, Th.D.

Classic dispensationalism is a system approvingly employed by prophecy cranks everywhere and tenaciously held by theological geriatrics with an arthritic grip. It was once expressive of a virtually monolithic and exclusivistic God-and-me-against-the-world fortress mentality. It has been considered an element of orthodoxy by fundamentalists, despite its total absence from and contradiction to historic **creedal** formulations. Nevertheless, it is still held as such by many today - too many, though their numbers are decreasing. Because of the gigantic market share and the popularity of *The Scofield Reference Bible*, the motto of old-line dispensationalism seemed to be: '(100,000 lemmings can't be **wrong!**)'

Historically, dispensationalism has been preponderantly anti-creedal. J. Dwight Pentecost stands before his students and warns against their joining with the historic movement of the Church of Jesus Christ, which he claims is hamstrung by "the shackles which dogmatism and creedalism sought to impose on interpretation."³ Until recently the cry from the dispensational camp has been: '(No creed but the Scofield Bible!)' Unfortunately, of course, such a statement is a **creedal** statement in itself. Dispensational devotees would use Scofield as the Cartesian definer of doctrinal reality: *He thinks, therefore he am!*

I have been interviewed on radio talk shows wherein my postmillennialism has been referred to as "your view" while dispensationalism was called "dispensational truth." Who wants their "view" to be in **contrast** to 'truth'?

But all of this is beginning to change with the increasing popularity of progressive dispensationalism, as we have been showing over the last several issues. Truly may we speak of *dispensationalism in transition*.

An illustration of the bold tenacity and exclusivistic mentality associated with "dispensational truth" is easily documented from dispensational works published over fifteen years ago. One of the leading respected theologians of classic dispensationalism is Charles Caldwell Ryrie. One of Ryrie's first published books was a rework of his doctoral dissertation entitled: *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune, NJ.: Loizeaux Brothers, 1953). The Foreword to Ryrie's book was by Lewis Sperry Chafer, the most influential dispensationalist of his day. Chafer's comments clearly revealed the fortress mentality of classic dispensationalism. I will record the bulk of the Foreword so you can experience with deep delight and sheer amazement the full extent of the tenacity of the position. I will note particularly interesting words with bold print - a bold print that I trust matches the boldness of the claim.

Chafer writes of Ryrie's dispensational work:

Each succeeding generation must fight its doctrinal baffles. As one of the last generation who has carried on extensively in writing in defense of the Truth, I greet with deep joy and appreciation the faithful and effective work of younger men on whom the burden [i.e., defense of dispensational truth] must rest in days to come.

... The sophistries of men who pass over determining Scriptures without being influenced by them can hardly stand against such clear, exhaustive argument [as presented by Ryrie]. Older men can release the pressure they have been under to shield the truth from the errors of those who claim to expound the truth of God when younger men assume the burden.

The essential facts respecting the premillennial faith are greatly misunderstood and often misstated by those who do not receive the direct, plain teaching of the Scriptures.

Chafer is not alone in such. In his Preface to the book just mentioned, Ryrie states that "premillennialism [sc. dispensationalism] is a system of Biblical truth." In his Introduction he comments: "Indeed, the broad and basic outlines of the truth remain, and these form an unshakable basis for the premillennial faith" (p. 11).

We join in chorus with historic premillennialist G. E. Ladd, who complained against such presentations in another context: "Hoyt's essay reflects the major problem in the discussion of the millennium. Several times he contrasts nondispensational views with his own, which he labels 'the biblical view'. If he is correct, then the other views, including my own, are 'unbiblical' or even heretical. This is the reason that over the years there has been little creative dialogue between dispensationalists and other schools of prophetic interpretation."⁴

It is vitally important to note that Ryrie's argument in his *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* is not worded merely as an engagement of academic debate, but as moral warfare. In effect, Ryrie charges moral culpability to those who would discount the dispensational claims to historic orthodoxy: "Others, attempting to confuse the issue. ..." (p. 17). He also notes particular conspirators in this shameless deception: "Allis, a leading amillennialist, is guilty of this" (pp. 17-18). Why would an evangelical theologian - an interpreter of the inspired Word of God! - "attempt to confuse the issue"? In essence, such intellectual behavior is a sin; indeed, it leaves one "guilty," according to Ryrie.

As C. C. R. (Charles C. Ryrie, not Credence Clearwater Revival) begins his assault on this supposed City of Man (non-

dispensational evangelicalism), he poisons the well with heresy concerns. At the inception of his study of hermeneutics he writes: "Although it could not be said that **all** amillennialists deny the verbal, plenary inspiration of the Scriptures, yet, as it will be shown later, it seems to be the first step in that direction" (p. 35). The phraseology "not all" strongly suggests as its semantic equivalent: "most." In other words, most **amillennialists** "deny the verbal, plenary inspiration of the Scriptures"! These are bold charges. No wonder these daring covenantal theologians are "guilty" and are "attempting to confuse the issues"! Shame!

As he closes his treatment of hermeneutics, Ryrie re-introduces a fatal dose of poison like unto that injected earlier: "The allegorical method of **amillennialism** is a step toward modernism. As has often been pointed out, it is almost impossible to find a premillennial liberal or modernist" (p. 46). Thus, in case the heart did not pump the earlier poison to the brain where it could do its work, he injects another dose! (Are you aware of how many **cults** are premillennial? This is a fun thing to point out to your dispensationalist friends who bring up this amillennial-liberal connection.)

Now consider what the new breed of dispensationalist is arguing. Despite the "burden" of Chafer's defending the truth while smiting the covenantalists "hip and thigh with a great slaughter" (Judg. 15:8), the very elements of "truth" themselves are being forsaken! And it is in response to the unbearably strong covenantal arguments! Notice Saucy's admission (and I praise him for it):

*The crucial distinction between dispensational and non-dispensational interpretations of Scripture centers on the meaning of Israel and the church. As indicated in chapter 1, dispensationalism has **undergone considerable modification** recently, **moving toward greater harmony with non-dispensationalism** in some areas. **Even on the crucial issue, many dispensationalists see much greater unity** than that taught by their forerunners. Instead of asserting a radical dichotomy of purpose and destiny, they see both Israel and the church as belonging to the one people of God and serving one historical purpose.' (Emphasis mine)*

In another important work by Blaising and Bock explaining the internal developments of dispensationalism, we read:

*This book explains a **significant change** presently taking place in dispensational interpretations of Scripture. This change affects the way **dispensationalists** understand **key biblical themes** such as the kingdom of God, the church in God's redemptive program, the interrelationship of the biblical covenants, the historical and prophetic fulfillment of those covenants, and the role of Christ in that fulfillment. . . .*

*Progressive dispensationalism offers a **number of modifications** to classical and revised dispensationalism which brings dispensationalism closer to contemporary evangelical biblical interpretation. . . .*

When we read Ryrie's claim that consistently 'clear, plain, normal hermeneutics is the essence of dispensationalism, we have to interpret the remark historically. It may have been true as an ideal or goal for revised

*dispensationalism, but the statement is not true as **acomprehensive principle inclusive of classical dispensationalism**. . . . The remark is at best **oversimplified, at worst false**.' (Emphasis mine.)*

Now all of this is not just merely interesting; it should not be lightly written off as just a natural mid-course correction worth — a chuckle or two from those who have always held to covenantal theology. Because of the way classic dispensationalists have framed their presentations and the manner in which they have advanced their arguments, this problem takes on a new and greater significance. The bold claims of dispensationalism to possessing the fundamental pattern of eschatological truth are increasingly being forsaken by the newer generation dispensationalists! Interestingly, the Progressive Dispensationalists have to spend more time fighting off their dispensational brethren than they do their covenantal opponents.

The next time someone tells you he is a dispensationalist, ask him, "What kind of dispensationalism?" Explain to your hapless friend that unless Jurassic Park's theme works, old line dispensationalism is a threatened species.

For Extra Study

The following tapes are available from me at 46 Main St., Conestee, SC 29636: "Israel and the New Testament" (Set #46: \$1 O); "Major Bible Prophecies" (Set #30: \$23).

¹"Dispensationalism may not be a household term, but it designates one of the most widespread and influential traditions in evangelical theology today," Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Up-to-Date Handbook of Contemporary Dispensation/ Thought* (Wheaton, IL: Bridgepoint, 1993), 9.

²Generally speaking, a simple test will determine if a man is a classic dispensationalist of the old school or a progressive dispensationalist — of the new school: (1) Ask him if he is a dispensationalist. If he answers, "Yes," he is either one or the other. (2) Ask him if he has arthritis. If he answers in the affirmative, he is a classic dispensationalist.

³J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 32.

⁴George Eldon Ladd, "An Historic Premillennial Response," in Robert G. Clouse, *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1977), 93.

⁵O. T. Allis was most definitely a *postmillennialist*. Is Ryrie morally culpable of deception here? No. It seems merely to be error based on ignorance of the facts. In his Foreword to Roderick Campbell's postmillennial work, *Israel and the New Covenant*, Allis writes: "[M]y own studies in this and related fields have convinced me that the most serious error in much of the current 'prophetic' teaching of today is the claim that the future of Christendom is to be read not in terms of Revival and Victory, but of growing impotence and apostasy. . . The language of the Great Commission is world-embracing; and it has back of it the authority and power of One who said: 'All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore and make disciples of all nations.' The duty of the church is to address herself to the achieving of this task in anticipation of her Lord's coming, and not to expect Him to call her away to glory before her task is accomplished." O. T. Allis, "Foreword" in Roderick Campbell, *Israel and the New Covenant* (Philadelphia Presbyterian and Reformed, 1954), p. ix.

⁶All page references to Saucy refer to: Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational & Non-Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).

⁷Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 9, 22, 36-37.

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