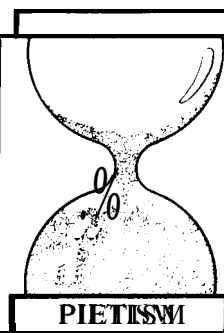


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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HERMENEUTIC IRONY

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In my June newsletter I pointed out the irony of the *character* of the argument between dispensationalism and the rest of evangelical theology. From the dispensationalists' perspective, they are engaged in moral warfare, a *jihad*, if you will. They are humbly defending the plain truth of Scripture against the foolish obfuscation and arrogance of other evangelical. I cited a few of their charges as evidence of the *character* issue in the debate.

The contest for them is not simply a matter of their claiming interpretively stronger principles providing keener insight into the Word of God. Rather, it is a *moral matter* involving fundamental issues of *character*: It is truth vs. error; a bold defense of "the direct, plain teaching of the Scriptures" vs. a mere "*claim* to expound the truth"; "(faithful and effective work" vs. "attempting to confuse the issues."

Now what is *ironic* about all of this is that new breed dispensationalists (a.k.a. progressive dispensationalists) have laid aside the character flaw approach. And the reason they do so is *because they recognize the legitimacy of the standard evangelical interpretive procedures*. They understand that the hermeneutic methodology of evangelical and reformed theology is not the problem; in fact, they admit to holding the same Interpretive approach.

In this article I want to look a little more closely at the irony of the change of tone in the eschatological debate. Liberalism was always a naively assumed and inconsistently employed principle; now even dispensational strongholds are admitting it.

Liberalism was a clever marketing tool, though, because it seemed so pure and simple to the everyday Christian. These good-hearted believers, unfortunately, had no inkling of the complexities of literature as such or of the different forms of biblical literature in particular. They were blind to the intricacies of grammatical and syntactical details in the original languages. They were deaf to the long-echoing issues in the historical debate, trusting that Scofield and Ryrie had done their homework. Contrary to popular opinion, biblical interpretation is not a simple matter; it engages the intellect in a forceful way,

Let us consider the changes in the argumentative position in dispensationalism today as opposed to the dispensationalism today of yesteryear (this is going to be confusing; I wish Ryrie would change the name of his book). I will begin by presenting the dogmatism in the earlier brands of dispensationalism, a dogmatism that must be a source of embarrassment today.

Zealous Liberalism

It is inarguably the case that literalism was a key

foundation-stone for the house that dispensationalism built (as well as its most successful advertising hook). Classic dispensationalism bet the bank on literalism. It was a rare dispensational treatise that did not leap into the hermeneutics debate early on. KISS was the interpretive methodology of the day: Keep It Simple, Stupid; but with all the changes today it was the KISS of death.

Consider J. Dwight Pentecost's best-selling classic, *Things to Come* (1958). Section one of this massive (591 pages) tome covers the first sixty-four pages (eleven percent of the total argument) of his presentation and is deemed absolutely foundational to it. His opening sentence dogmatically states the situation clearly: "No question facing the student of Eschatology is more important than the question of the method to be employed in the interpretation of the prophetic Scriptures" (p. 1). Hermeneutics is an issue without peer, according to Pentecost.

One of the odd features of the historical section of his study is proving that literalism was the method used by the Jews of the first century - the same Jews who rejected Christ and His teaching! "The prevailing method of interpretation among the Jews at the time of Christ was certainly the literal method of interpretation" (ibid., p. 17).

Unfortunately, old-line dispensationalists did not learn from the teaching of the Lord during His earthly ministry, Christ Himself had to counter such Jewish literalism in Nicodemus' query as to how to re-enter his mother's womb to be born again: "Jesus answered and said to him, 'Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things, .? If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?'" (John 3:10, 12),

Ryrie's dissertation was published as *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (1953). This 157 page work opens with an introduction to the evangelical prophetic systems (chapter one), then surveys the historical issues (chapter two; dispensationalism's understanding of history follows the pattern of Winston Churchill: "History will be kind to me for I intend to write it"). He finally begins his actual biblical argument in earnest in chapter three, which is entitled: "Its Basis in Hermeneutics." This key chapter is thirteen pages long, or eight percent of his presentation.

In his second paragraph he states the matter vigorously: "This discussion of hermeneutics as a basis of the premillennial faith is essential to the subsequent argument" (p. 34). He concludes this chapter noting its importance once again: "Thus, premillennialism is solidly based in hermeneutics, and upon this solid foundation the remainder of this book is built" (p. 47).

One of the most recent books defending old-timey dispensationalism is Willis and Master's *Issues in Dispensationalism* (1994). The first chapter introduces the reader to the "problem" of change affecting dispensationalism. Then it sets forth "Dispensational Hermeneutics" in chapter two. Chapter three also deals with the hermeneutic question: "Biblical Meaning of 'Fulfillment.'" Thus, two of the twelve chapters are directly given over to the question. After all those years of bearing Chafer's "burden" of defending the truth (see last month's newsletter), old-timey dispensationalists saw the light at the end of the tunnel. Unfortunately, it was the light of an oncoming train: the SB&B Railroad (Saucy, Blaising, and Bock Railroad).

Many arguments have been cooked up in their hermeneutic attempts to defend dispensational literalism. Old-line dispensationalists have so much crud built up in their oven that they now only have room to bake one cupcake. They should realize the clean-up, spruce-up party's over; there is no need to do any housework at all because after four years the dirt doesn't get any worse. I used to feast at the dispensational table in college. But dispensationalism is like Italian food: five or six days after you eat an Italian meal you are hungry again. This older form of dispensationalism has adopted the adage: "If you look good and dress well, you don't need a purpose in life."

Ryrie bet the bank when he argued that hermeneutic literalism was a distinctive of dispensationalism, one of its *sine qua non*. We have to sense the vigor of the dispensational commitment to this principle. (And you must believe me because when a writer refers to himself as "we" and to the reader as "you," it is two against one!)

And what is the exact nature of this interpretive system? "The principle might also be called normal interpretation since the literal meaning of words is the normal approach to their understanding in all languages. It might also be designated plain interpretation so that no one receives mistaken notion that the literal principle rules out figures of speech" (Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, p. 87). Sounds great. So very simple.

Along Comes Progressive Dispensationalism

But new world order dispensationalists Blaising and Bock in their *Progressive Dispensationalism* (1993) demur from such claims to a distinctive hermeneutic. Bock comments: "For some, interpretation is like the popular Nike television commercial: just as one merely laces up new basketball shoes

and hits the floor to 'just do it,' so the interpreter should merely open up the text and 'just read it.' Unfortunately, it isn't quite that simple" (p. 58). Well said! It is time the older dispensationalism recognizes its contemporary plight: good judgment comes from experience, and experience comes from bad judgment. It was a bad idea to invest so much in literalism. The classic dispensationalist took comfort in saying, "I have enough money to last me the rest of my life, unless I buy something."

Elsewhere Blaising writes: "consistently literal exegesis is inadequate to describe the essential distinctive of dispensationalism" ("Development of Dispensationalism," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, #579, p. 272). Serious trouble is brewing when one of a system's *sine qua non* is '(inadequate.'" Reconstructionists have thrown enough books at dispensationalists to take care of the situation. After awhile you wonder when a book and a head collide and there is a hollow sound: is it always from the book?

Blaising & Bock, *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church*: "hermeneutical methodology has been rethought and is no longer perceived as an exclusively dispensational hermeneutic" (p. 378). Now that's not good news for one's *sine qua non* either! This is due to the "conceptual naivete" of Ryrie's hermeneutic which involves a "methodological deficiency in the very hermeneutic that it proposed," which is gravely serious in that "this hermeneutical deficiency was structured into the very meaning of dispensational thought and practice in its advocacy of clear, plain, normal, or literal interpretation" (p. 29). Thus, today there is "the present-day inapplicability of Ryrie's exclusive hermeneutic" (p. 32).

Is it not ironic, then, that those classic dispensationalists who charged the evangelical world with error regarding interpretive principles find their own system going over to the opposition? This should be pointed out to erstwhile dispensationalists today.'

1, For those interested in additional studies on dispensationalism, they may order the following tapes from me at 46 Main St., Conestee, SC 29636: #6 "Dispensational Distortions" (2 tapes; \$1 O); #7 "BJU Student Questions Postmillennialism" (1 tape; \$5); #8 "Hermeneutics, Israel, and Dispensationalism" (1 tape; \$5); #11 "Postmillennialism and Preterism" (4 tapes; \$20); #25 "The Beast, Daniel 9, and Postmillennialism" (1 tape; \$5); #38 "Hal Lindsey's Road to Holocaust" (1 tape; \$5).